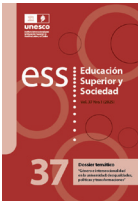

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11. *Alma Mater*, Nourishing Mother? Women's Longing and Belonging in Public Universities in Brazil and England

Alma Mater, ¿madre acogedora? Anhelo y pertenencia de las mujeres en las universidades públicas de Brasil e Inglaterra

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how women who are first in their families to access higher education navigate belonging in two elite public universities: the University of Campinas (Unicamp) in Brazil and the University of Cambridge in England. Moving beyond metrics of access and diversity, it examines the emotional, structural, and epistemic challenges that shape students' sense of belonging during their undergraduate studies. Through a transnational, intergenerational qualitative study based on narrative interviews and memory work, the research draws on the life stories of 'daughters'—first-generation university students—and their 'mothers', women who had limited access to formal education and no access to higher education. By including both generations, the study foregrounds how intergenerational longings for education shape women's participation in higher education today. The findings show that despite more diverse student intakes, racialised, classed, and gendered exclusions continue to shape students' experiences of higher education. Acts of care —whether material, emotional, or symbolic— offer partial forms of support, yet do not fully counterbalance the pressures of navigating elite institutions. Rather than simply informing policy, this article calls for a cultural shift: one that centres the experiences of under-represented women and reimagines the public university as a site of shared belonging, beyond tokenistic inclusion.

Keywords: First-generation students; public universities; intergenerational memory; gender and education; student belonging

Alma Mater, ¿madre acogedora? Anhelo y pertenencia de las mujeres en las universidades públicas de Brasil e Inglaterra

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora cómo las mujeres que son las primeras de su familia en acceder a la educación superior navegan por la pertenencia en dos universidades públicas de élite: la Universidad de Campinas (Unicamp) en Brasil y la Universidad de Cambridge en Inglaterra. Más allá de las métricas de acceso y diversidad, examina los retos emocionales, estructurales y epistémicos que conforman el sentido de pertenencia de las estudiantes durante sus estudios universitarios. Mediante un estudio cualitativo transnacional e intergeneracional basado en entrevistas narrativas y trabajo de memoria, la investigación se basa en las historias de vida de las «hijas» —primeras generaciones de estudiantes universitarias— y sus «madres», mujeres que tuvieron un acceso limitado a la educación formal y ningún acceso a la educación superior. Al incluir a ambas generaciones, el estudio pone en primer plano el modo en que los anhelos intergeneracionales de educación configuran la participación de las mujeres en la enseñanza superior en la actualidad. Los resultados muestran que, a pesar de la mayor diversidad de estudiantes, las exclusiones raciales, de clase y de género siguen determinando las experiencias de los estudiantes en la enseñanza superior. Los actos de cuidado —ya sean materiales, emocionales o simbólicos— ofrecen formas parciales de apoyo, pero no contrarrestan totalmente las presiones de navegar por instituciones de élite. En lugar de limitarse a informar sobre políticas, este artículo reclama un cambio cultural que centre las experiencias de las mujeres infrarrepresentadas y reimagine la universidad pública como un lugar de pertenencia compartida, más allá de la inclusión simbólica.

Palabras clave: Estudiantes de primera generación; universidades públicas; memoria intergeneracional; género y educación; pertenencia estudiantil

Alma Mater, mãe acolhedora? O anseio e o pertencimento das mulheres às universidades públicas no Brasil e na Inglaterra

RESUMO

Este artigo explora como as mulheres que são as primeiras em suas famílias a terem acesso ao ensino superior lidam com o sentimento de pertencimento em duas universidades públicas de elite: a Universidade de Campinas (Unicamp), no Brasil, e a Universidade de Cambridge, na Inglaterra. Indo além das métricas de acesso e diversidade, ele examina os desafios emocionais, estruturais e epistêmicos que moldam o sentimento de pertencimento das alunas durante seus estudos de graduação. Por meio de um estudo qualitativo transnacional e intergeracional baseado em entrevistas narrativas e trabalho de memória, a pesquisa se baseia nas histórias de vida das "filhas" — estudantes universitárias de primeira geração — e de suas "mães", mulheres que tiveram acesso limitado à educação formal e nenhum acesso ao ensino superior. Ao incluir ambas as gerações, o estudo destaca como os anseios intergeracionais por educação moldam a participação das mulheres no ensino superior hoje. Os resultados mostram que, apesar de um corpo discente mais diversificado, as exclusões racializadas, de classe e de gênero continuam a moldar as experiências dos estudantes no ensino superior. Atos de cuidado — sejam eles materiais, emocionais ou simbólicos — oferecem formas parciais de apoio, mas não contrabalançam totalmente as pressões de navegar em instituições de elite. Em vez de simplesmente informar políticas, este artigo clama por uma mudança cultural: uma que centralize as experiências de mulheres sub-representadas e reimagine a universidade pública como um local de pertencimento compartilhado, além da inclusão simbólica.

Palavras-chave: Estudantes de primeira geração; universidades públicas; memória intergeracional; gênero e educação; pertencimento estudantil

¿*Alma Mater*, mère bienveillante? Le désir et l'appartenance des femmes dans les universités publiques au Brésil et en Angleterre

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore la manière dont les femmes qui sont les premières de leur famille à accéder à l'enseignement supérieur naviguent dans deux universités publiques d'élite: l'Université de Campinas (Unicamp) au Brésil et l'Universi-

té de Cambridge en Angleterre. Au-delà des mesures d'accès et de diversité, il examine les défis émotionnels, structurels et épistémiques qui façonnent le sentiment d'appartenance des étudiants au cours de leurs études de premier cycle. Grâce à une étude qualitative transnationale et intergénérationnelle basée sur des entretiens narratifs et un travail de mémoire, la recherche s'appuie sur les récits de vie des «filles» - les étudiantes universitaires de la première génération - et de leurs «mères», des femmes qui ont eu un accès limité à l'éducation formelle et n'ont pas eu accès à l'enseignement supérieur. En incluant les deux générations, l'étude met en évidence la manière dont les aspirations intergénérationnelles à l'éducation façonnent la participation des femmes à l'enseignement supérieur aujourd'hui. Les résultats montrent qu'en dépit d'une plus grande diversité des étudiants, les exclusions fondées sur la race, la classe sociale et le sexe continuent de façonner les expériences des étudiants en matière d'enseignement supérieur. Les actes d'attention - qu'ils soient matériels, émotionnels ou symboliques - offrent des formes partielles de soutien, mais ne contrebalancent pas totalement les pressions exercées par la navigation dans les institutions d'élite. Plutôt que de se contenter d'informer les politiques, cet article appelle à un changement culturel: un changement qui mette l'accent sur les expériences des femmes sous-représentées et qui réimagine l'université publique comme un lieu d'appartenance partagée, au-delà d'une inclusion symbolique.

Mots clés: Étudiants de première génération; universités publiques; mémoire intergénérationnelle; genre et éducation; appartenance étudiante

1. INTRODUCTION

Access to public universities in Brazil and England remained largely unrepresentative of the broader social landscape until the twenty-first century, when distinct political and social contexts gave rise to policies that significantly changed student demographics. For the first time, record numbers of state school and non-white students gained access to elite public universities. While statistical data confirms progress in terms of diversity, this article shifts the conversation beyond numbers to the lived experience of belonging, as revealed through empirical, narrative-based research.

Drawing on the life stories of women who are the first in their families to attend university, this study is underpinned by a feminist epistemology that centers lived experience and memory as sites of knowledge. I argue that numerical inclusion alone does not undo long-standing exclusions, particularly

those shaped by racialized, classed, and gendered histories. At the same time, I suggest that, through these women's experiences of belonging, we can imagine futures not only for institutions but also for the women who inhabit them—futures in which best practices from different national contexts foster more equitable and supportive environments. In such futures, governments, universities, and individuals can learn from one another to enable better lives for current and future generations of under-represented women in higher education—and beyond.

By focusing on Brazil and England, this study also invites dialogue across geopolitical contexts. Brazil, often seen as a recipient of policy models from the Global North, offers critical insights into reparative justice in public higher education—not only through its more robust use of affirmative action but also through a stronger material commitment to the public good.

1.1. A Study of 'Mothers' and 'Daughters'

This article is based on a broader doctoral project and a previous study (Del Fiorentino, 2021, 2023). I call *daughters* women who are the first generation in their families to have access to higher education. They are current undergraduates or recent graduates from two elite public universities: the University of Campinas (Unicamp) in Brazil and the University of Cambridge in England. I also bring their *mothers* into the study—women who had limited access to formal education, notably no access to higher education.

Drawing on the metaphor of *alma mater*—literally 'nourishing mother'—this article explores whether universities can become spaces of nourishment for under-represented women as they pursue their undergraduate degrees, often while also coming of age. I explore the role of care in these women's first contact with higher education, and how their sense of belonging interplays in a triangle involving their mothers or main caregivers, the university, and themselves. This framing enables a dual analysis of the university as both a public institution and as a site of care, where inclusion and exclusion are materially and symbolically produced.

This article builds on a presentation first shared at the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) conference in Chicago (Del Fiorentino, 2025), where I introduced the conceptual framing of *longing and belonging* to explore the emotional, structural, and epistemic dimensions of first-generation women's experiences in higher education. In this framing, longing refers not only to the student's aspirations but also to the unfulfilled desires of

the women before them—particularly their mothers—who were historically excluded from educational spaces. These women's longings for education reflect a desire for better lives—lives rooted in dignity, basic needs being met (particularly in the Brazilian context), and the pursuit of both symbolic and material recognition. A university degree is often seen as a route to upward mobility—a 'ticket' to the middle class—but it also reflects a deeper longing for belonging in higher education and the world. For these women, it marks a disruption of the patterns of reproduction lived by those before them—an escape from precarious labour and precarious lives.

Belonging, meanwhile, speaks to how these students navigate elite universities as both a site of possibility and dislocation. They are 'insiders'—by merit of admission—yet also 'outsiders', continually negotiating their presence in spaces not originally designed for them. Their stories highlight how access alone does not guarantee inclusion; belonging here is neither automatic nor passive, but a contested and relational process.

This article asks: how do women who are the first in their families to access public universities—often also elite spaces—navigate their sense of belonging during their undergraduate studies? And what can their experiences tell us about the role of the university—both as a public institution and as a potential site of care and nourishment—alongside their families, in either reinforcing or challenging long-standing exclusions? Further down, to conclude, what best practices can be learned from transnational contexts and institutions and used as benchmarks for change, based on feasible realities?

To situate these women's experiences, it is important to revisit the historical exclusions that have shaped who has access to and experiences belonging in elite public universities—and under what conditions.

1.2. Historical Exclusions and Public Universities: Who is the Public?

Elite universities are elite because they exclude. Both in Brazil and the UK, public universities are considered elite, although some are more prestigious than others. They nonetheless play a central role in reproducing class and racial hierarchies—and in England, this is further entangled with the legacy of colonial power and white supremacy.

In both countries, access to public universities has historically favoured those who could afford private schooling and preparatory courses, excluding the majority of state school students (Johnson, 2015; França & Portella, 2023; GOV UK, 2019; Green & Kynaston, 2019). However, material access differs. Brazil's

public universities are tuition-free and primarily state-funded, with minimal private income. Some offer limited paid work-study schemes, basic student accommodation, and evening programmes that enable students to work. In contrast, public universities in England—free until 1998—now charge tuition fees, operate with mixed funding, and are increasingly reliant on private income. Most students cover fees and living costs through government loans.

Elite universities in both contexts are located in expensive urban centres. In Brazil, undergraduate students often aim to study locally to avoid the cost of leaving home. In England, by contrast, it is more common for students to move away from home, living in paid university accommodation or shared housing, with college accommodation mandatory in some institutions, such as Cambridge.

The next sections will explore detailed histories and realities in Brazil and England, as well as their common issues and different approaches to widening access to higher education that resulted in the first-time entry of the participants into these elite spaces as part of the broader transformations of the twenty-first century.

1.2.1. A White Debt – Affirmative Action in Brazil

In Brazil, where 56% of the population identifies as Black or Brown, only 4% of this demographic were enrolled at a university in 1997 (MEC, 2012).

After Britain abolished its participation in the slave trade, Brazil capitalised on the existing infrastructure and became the main player in the transatlantic slave trade (Bob Fernandes, 2023; Alencastro, 2021). By the mid-19th century, it had become the largest importer of enslaved people in the Americas (Reis, 2017). Brazil was also the last country in the region to abolish slavery, in 1888, and failed to offer reparations, land, or access to education to formerly enslaved populations. Instead, the state actively promoted European immigration to meet labour demands and further its racial whitening project, offering white European immigrants land and other incentives (Golin, 2014).

Beyond the material barriers faced by Black and Brown Brazilians in accessing formal education, there is also a metaphysical struggle rooted in the national imaginary. The dominant narrative—promoted by the state and mainstream scholarship—centred on the myth of racial democracy: the idea that Brazil's multiracial society had overcome racism (Stepan, 1991; Kent et al., 2015; Schwarcz, 2012; Twine, 1997). This myth, long criti-

cised by Brazilian intellectuals such as Lélia Gonzalez (1984), writing from a Black feminist perspective, and by sociologists like Hasenbalg (1979), contributed to the erasure of racial inequality from public discourse and made it more difficult to legitimise initiatives aimed at improving access for racialised groups.

Women's access to formal education was shaped by racialised labour and histories of servitude. After abolition, and with rapid urbanisation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many Black Brazilians moved to cities and into precarious jobs (Alencastro, 1997; Santos, 2020; Santos, 2021). For Black women, this meant a shift from unpaid domestic labour during enslavement to poorly paid domestic service (Teixeira, 2021), as Preta-Rara (2019) frames it in her subtitle: *'The modern-day slave quarters are the maid's little room'*. While women had entered higher education earlier, it was from the 1960s to–70s that white middle-class women gained more significant access. Black and Brown women, however, remained concentrated in domestic work—a 'female ghetto' (Bruschini & Lombardi, 2000, p. 69), revealing the racialisation of gender.

The Black movement's demand for education has long included access to higher education. In 1983, Black activist Abdias do Nascimento proposed a law to reserve 20% of university places for Black students (Lima & Campos, 2020). Although unsuccessful, it laid the groundwork for later affirmative action. In the early 2000s, regional initiatives began reserving places for students from state schools and Black or Brown backgrounds (Paschel, 2016; Vaz, 2022), sparking national debate. Supporters saw them as historical reparations; critics invoked meritocracy. In 2012, a federal law mandated that all federally funded public universities reserve 50% of places for state-school students, with quotas for Black, Brown, and Indigenous students. By 2018, for the first time, non-white students formed the majority in federal universities (IBGE, 2019).

While the law did not apply to public universities funded at the state level—including the country's top institutions, the State University of Sao Paulo (USP) and Unicamp—both eventually introduced their affirmative action policies. Unicamp pioneered its PAAIS programme[1] in 2004, offering bonus points to state school applicants. It later extended this to Black and Brown students and, in 2019, Unicamp introduced racial quotas, reserving 15% to 27.2% of places per course[2], along with a separate entrance exam for Indigenous students[3]. Unicamp's quotas, introduced later and below federal thresholds, have resulted in slower progress. As of 2025, the student body remains

majority white, male, and privately educated. Still, 45% of undergraduates come from state schools, 32% identify as Black, Brown or Indigenous, and 43% are from low-income families (Ramos, 2025).

1.2.2. The Private School Problem – Access and Participation Plans in England

In England and Wales, where 82% of the population identifies as white (GOV UK, 2024), access debates often centre on class. Though only 6% attend private schools (Green & Kynaston, 2019), these students are vastly overrepresented in elite institutions, particularly Oxford and Cambridge (Oxbridge).

Oxbridge embodies a distinct elitism (Bolton, 2021), shaped by colonial power and racial hierarchies that persist in its culture (Ahmed, 2012; Arday & Mirza, 2018), with legacies in its relationships with former colonies and, internally, through the North–South divide and the forced Union—where Ireland, Scotland, and Wales were sites of extraction and control (Olusoga, 2021). Heavily funded by endowments, donations, and public money, Oxbridge served the sons of aristocracy and Empire (Verkaik, 2019), continuing the private boarding school system. At the same time, for those historically excluded, an Oxbridge degree has long symbolised an ascent to gentility. Writing in 1840, Branwell Brontë reflected on this through his Irish father's trajectory: *'the young man Papa ceased to be when he crossed the Irish Sea and matriculated at Saint John's College, Cambridge… At what point does one's family escape the base servitude of field and factory and begin the ascent to gentility?'* (de la Motte, 2022, p. 31)—a question that still echoes.

Cambridge was the last British university to award degrees to women, doing so only in 1948[4]. Before access was extended to working-class and racialised women more recently, the struggle began with upper- and middle-class white women, leading to the creation of women-only colleges in the 1860s–70s amid fierce resistance. The enduring 'town and gown' divide adds another layer: local working-class women remain in roles of servitude within the university, as 'bedders', cleaners, and caterers (Stubbings, 1995).

As public universities began charging variable tuition fees in 2006, the UK government required institutions to commit to widening access for under-represented groups through Access Agreements—now Access and Participation Plans (APPs) (GOV UK, 2023). Each institution submits its own plan to the Office for Students. However, APPs do not show commitments to specific percentage targets beyond state school admissions. This limited focus has been criticised by access advocates, who argue it benefits grammar and

selective schools—often in London—while neglecting broader inequalities. In contrast, opponents of such initiatives altogether have dismissed them as 'social engineering' or 'positive discrimination'. At Cambridge, state school admissions reached 72.5% in 2022 (The Economist, 2023)—above the 69.1% target but below the 94% national average (GOV UK, 2019). BAME[5] admissions rose from 22% in 2017/18 to 36.1% in 2021/22 (University of Cambridge, 2023). The 2025-2030 APP removed percentage-based targets altogether (Jeffreys & Burchell, 2024).

The colour-blind approach to student intake in APPs reflects a broader postracial narrative in Britain, rooted in imperial histories where colonial violence was geographically and morally distanced, confined to foreign lands. While slaveholders were compensated after abolition and formerly enslaved people were not, Harding (2023) underscores how this lack of both material and historical reparations continues to shape Britain's consciousness today. Scanlan (2022) further argues that this national amnesia stems from Britain's dual role in the transatlantic slave trade: both as a major profiteer and later as a celebrated abolitionist. This ambiguity fosters a false idea of redemption from Britain's slave empire, obscuring its foundational violence and undermining calls for reparations.

Although Cambridge and Unicamp differ in age —one medieval, the other founded in the 1960s— both institutions followed similarly racialised and gendered trajectories of access: initially dominated by white, middle- and upper-class men, followed by women from similar backgrounds. Only in the twenty-first century did students from state schools and racially minoritised groups begin to enter in significant numbers. The women in this study are situated within that broader shift. Their experiences of racialisation reflect national demographics—most Unicamp participants are non-white, while most Cambridge participants are white. Yet all are racialised: in Brazil, where race and class walk hand in hand, with visible and structural markers reinforcing exclusion; and in England, where both racism and the layering of whiteness — through class, accent, region, and perceived respectability — can render students out of place in elite southern institutions like Cambridge.

The next section explores how these layered exclusions are lived by the women in this study, through their longings for education and what it means to belong.

2. WOMEN LONGING AND BE-LONGING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Women's access to formal education has always been a battleground, with education representing a portal to agency and mobility, where the institution becomes not just a site of learning but a window to the world. This article explores experiences of (un)belonging in higher education across material, emotional, psychological, and epistemic dimensions, drawing on intersectionality and broader Black feminist frameworks, alongside Brah's concept of *diaspora space*—reimagined here as a metaphor for how participants' selves are bordered by elite institutions structured through coloniality, racial capitalism, class exclusion, and gendered histories of servitude.

To examine whether elite public universities act as 'nourishing mothers' for the 'daughters' in this study, I begin with a metaphysical understanding of belonging as *be-longing*—a longing to be and to exist within public higher education.

2.1 Metaphysical and Intergenerational Belonging

Heidegger's philosophy situates being and belonging within a broader notion of *being-in-a-world* (2007, p. 33), which implies that belonging is as diverse as people's lives and experiences across different spaces and times. This approach is crucial to avoid universalising women's experiences. Rather than adopting an Aristotelian essentialist view, women's *longing to be* is relational, dialectical, and dynamic—a 'living thing'—as they bridge worlds and generations in contexts where record numbers of under-represented students have only recently gained access to elite universities in Brazil and England.

In *All Desire Is a Desire for Being*, René Girard (2023) develops metaphysical ideas of belonging by highlighting its inherent violence: to *be* and to *belong* are intrinsically tied to exclusion, rejection, and thus, violence. Belonging, in this view, is only possible because others are made not to belong—its very structure requires unbelonging. This framework helps to understand the tensions experienced by under-represented groups navigating spaces historically occupied by privileged peers in elite public universities.

The intergenerational metaphysical dimension of belonging—what I call *longing*—is reflected in *memoirs* of first-generation graduates exploring their mothers' unfulfilled desires and how these memories are carried forward. UK white feminist scholars like Steedman (2005) and Moss (2025) contextualise

their experiences within the British welfare state of the 1950s. Steedman, writing as a first-generation university student, reflects on what her mother lacked and what she herself received: *'What my mother lacked, I was given'* (p. 122). Moss, a generation later, describes her own mother's cohort as *'generously educated right to the doctorate by the welfare state and then walled up upon marriage'* (p. 28). In Brazil, Black feminist scholars such as Preta-Rara (2019) and Djamila Ribeiro (2021)—daughters and granddaughters of domestic workers— also write about their ruptures with reproductions within the women in their families as the first to access higher education in the twenty-first century. This shift coincided with redistributive social programmes and the introduction of affirmative actions for higher education during the Workers' Party administrations—the closest Brazil has come to a welfare state.

My study continues this trajectory, turning to a newer configuration of first-generation students from the 21st century. Similar to these *memoirs*, it brings together mothers' and daughters' generational longings to belong in higher education and beyond—not only through daughters' intimate narratives but also by incorporating mothers' lived experiences directly from interviews.

By exploring belonging through intergenerational lenses and including both mothers' and daughters' accounts, this study offers a long-term perspective on enduring structural inequalities. It focuses on a new demographic of pioneering women—state school students, both white and non-white, yet all racialised in distinct ways—who gained university access only in the twenty-first century, each with their own specificities. These women are pioneering not only because they are the first in their families to enter elite institutions, but because their presence transforms these historically exclusive spaces. In occupying them, they are opening pathways for those who come after, contributing to broader shifts in who belongs in higher education and what it means to belong.

2.2 Material and Social Belonging

Alongside metaphysical notions, I draw on Black feminist frameworks to understand material and social belonging from an intersectional perspective. This allows for exploration of overlaps between participants and the influence of wider structural forces on individual experiences. I build on bell hooks' (2009) reflections on home and belonging as forms of homecoming that affirm one's sense of self and emotional rootedness, connecting (un)belonging to the (un)familiar. For these women, belonging encompasses tangible

spaces—such as university and home—as well as subjective spaces of mind, knowledge, and emotion.

For many participants, the search for belonging is driven by a shared desire to escape inherited reproductions of precarious care labour—both paid and unpaid. Brazilian mothers often left school early, lacked access to basic needs, and faced early separations. With the 1944 Education Act promising secondary education for all, UK mothers more commonly completed secondary school and had greater material access, though many paused careers for caregiving. Belonging is explored through what persists and what is disrupted when daughters enter higher education.

Meritocratic narratives framing success as individual effort shape participants' experiences as top students in state schools, only to turn against them in elite universities where they struggle to keep up with privileged peers. This reversal often leads to impostor syndrome, anxiety, and exhaustion, as structural inequalities are internalized as personal failure. Gratitude for access coexists with the emotional weight of being the first and the persistent sense of not fully belonging.

2.3 Diasporic Spaces

To conceptualise women's 'bordered selves' in elite universities, I build on Avtar Brah's concept of *diaspora space* (2010, p. 181), which she defines as the intersection of diaspora, border, and dislocation. For Brah, diaspora space is not limited to migrants but includes all who inhabit the space shaped by histories of colonialism, racialisation, and power, natives and 'diasporians' alike. It is a site where multiple subject positions intersect and contest one another across economic, cultural, and psychic dimensions.

Extending this framework, I propose the notion of *diasporic spaces*—in the plural—as metaphorical zones of unbelonging within hegemonic academic institutions, manifesting in both material and emotional or psychological dimensions. For first-generation women dwelling in diasporic spaces, navigating elite universities often feels like stepping into a foreign land. Emerging from the tension between (un)familiar worlds—the relatable and the unrelatable, their own expectations, those of their families, and the collective imaginary that frames these institutions as the pinnacle of educational success—these women are often forcibly dislocated from their sense of self. Their identities are bordered not only by the institutions themselves, but also by the cultural codes, class markers, and historical legacies of coloniality and

white supremacy that shape these spaces—spaces that were never designed with them in mind, and were, in fact, designed to keep them out.

The next section outlines the methodological and ethical choices underpinning this study.

3. METHODOLOGY, METHODS, AND PARTICIPANTS

This study adopts memory and the politics of memory as its core methodological approach to explore (un)belonging in elite universities, examining how wider, older forces shape experiences of (un) belonging today. I draw on Michael Pollak's (1993) notion of *'mémoires souterraines'* (p. 18)—*underground memories*—intimate, often unspoken recollections that persist beneath dominant narratives. Developed in the context of post-WWII, Pollak shows how both Jewish survivors and members of the wider society in Germany and Austria returned to shared spaces carrying ambivalent feelings—between the need for reintegration and the unresolved weight of shame, guilt, or perceived complicity—which gave rise to silences. These silences served as a *'modus vivendi'* (p. 22), a *means of coexistence* between those oppressed and those complicit, however tacitly, in their oppression.

I extend his concept to contemporary elite university spaces where dominant ideals of merit and inclusion coexist unequally with the lived experiences of minoritised students. As historically underrepresented groups begin to occupy elite educational spaces, they carry with them collective, inherited, and personal histories of exclusion, discrimination, and epistemic violence, underrepresented women often navigating contradictory feelings—gratitude and dislocation, recognition and erasure, pride and discomfort—which rarely surface in institutional portrayals of success and inclusion. Operating as a means of coexistence within hegemonic structures not built for them, these memories live in silences, subtle ways, and the private intimacy of the family or within groups they experience as relatable, rarely accessible through conventional research methods. To access them, I developed a *mother and daughter* methodology, which positions family-based narratives as a vital epistemological space for understanding belonging.

In my earlier study (Del Fiorentino, 2021, 2023), drawing on Hirsch's (2012) concept of *postmemory*, I introduced the concept of *intertwined memories* to describe the reciprocal flow of memory and meaning between mothers and daughters in contexts of generational exclusion from formal education.

Daughters often carry the unrealised aspirations of their mothers, while mothers experience their daughters' achievements as symbolic repair. This bidirectional process does not erase past hardship but reshapes its meaning. Intertwined memories make visible how belonging is forged relationally—between past and present, between women, across generations.

3.1 Methods

This study employed qualitative methods to assess the layered experiences of women navigating elite public universities. Through in-depth, intergenerational interviews and participant observation, I traced how first-generation women students and their mothers articulate belonging, aspiration, and structural constraint in their own terms.

Data was collected between 2023 and 2025 in Brazil and England. I conducted 25 interviews in total: 6 mother–daughter pairs affiliated with Unicamp, 5 mother–daughter pairs affiliated with Cambridge, and 2 additional daughters from Cambridge whose mothers were not available for interview. The study also includes background information on grandmothers, particularly their occupations, to trace intergenerational patterns of women's labour and educational access.

As an alumna of both universities, I accessed participants through institutional and personal networks, including *alumni* groups, social media, and referrals. I employed purposive and snowball sampling, circulating a call for participants with clear inclusion criteria. Most daughter participants responded directly and then introduced me to their mothers.

Interviews were semi-structured and narrative-based, designed to elicit life stories and explore themes such as educational aspiration, family histories, labour, exclusion, and experiences of higher education. Interviews were typically conducted individually, in Portuguese or English, depending on the participant's location. Some Brazilian mothers requested their daughters' presence during the conversation. I kept in touch with most participants for follow-up questions, particularly with undergraduates, to learn how their lives unfolded after completing their degrees.

The interviews ranged from 40 minutes to over three hours and were audio-recorded with consent. Transcripts were produced *verbatim*, with Portuguese excerpts translated by me and analysed using *in vivo* coding and thematic analysis. I paid particular attention to silences, hesitations, emotional

shifts, and relational moments, especially when stories were jointly told or remembered differently across generations.

Ethical approval was obtained through the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. Given the personal and, at times, painful nature of the stories shared, I prioritised care and reciprocity throughout the research process. All names and identifying details have been anonymised; pseudonyms are used throughout. In cases where mothers discussed their daughters or vice versa, I ensured consent and clarity regarding which parts could be quoted.

This approach does not aim for representativeness but centres on specificity. The goal is to attend closely to how belonging is shaped through particular constellations of social, racial, and geographic experiences, as narrated across generations. What follows is an overview of the participants.

3.2 Participants

This section presents the demographic and educational backgrounds of the women interviewed, grouped by their institutional affiliation—Unicamp or Cambridge. All daughter participants were the first in their families to attend university. Not all mothers had accessed higher education.

3.2.1 Daughters – Unicamp

Of the six Unicamp daughters, two are identified as white, one as Black, and three as Brown. All attended state-funded schools and entered Unicamp through affirmative action policies. Six received additional points for having attended state schools; one of these also received bonus points for self-identifying as Brown under earlier criteria that predated the introduction of racial quotas. One participant entered via the racial quota for Black students. Degree subjects included Social Sciences, History, Education, Biology, Civil Engineering, and Computer Science.

At the time of our interviews, one was in a public PhD programme; two had already completed PhDs and were working in their fields, including one who had relocated to Cambridge and was employed at an institution affiliated with the University of Cambridge; one was still an undergraduate; and two were working in areas related to their degrees.

All began their degrees while living at home or with close family—one participant, originally from another state, lived with a relative near the universi-

ty. Most remained in these arrangements due to financial constraints, until a couple were later able to move into free university accommodation as places became available.

3.2.2 Mothers – Unicamp

Unicamp mothers had significantly less access to formal education. Most left school during or shortly after primary education, and only two completed secondary school. All worked in roles directly or indirectly linked to care, including domestic work, cleaning, and elderly care. Some were full-time mothers or housewives without paid employment. At the time of our interviews, one mother was self-employed as a cook, one worked as a meal cook in a state school, one was employed as a cleaner, one was unemployed and living on a widow's pension, and two identified as housewives—one of whom had retired due to health issues stemming from her previous care work.

3.2.3 Daughters – Cambridge

The seven Cambridge daughters were educated in state-funded schools across England and Ireland. Four identified as white, including, in their own words, as British, English, Irish, mixed, and other white; two identified as Black with Caribbean heritage; and one as Brown with Indian heritage. Their degree subjects spanned Humanities, Social Sciences, Biological Sciences, and Law. At the time of the interview, three were undergraduates and four had recently graduated. Among the graduates, two were working in fields related to their degrees, one was job-seeking, and another was considering further education.

One participant was from Ireland, one from the North of England, and five from the South, including three from London. All lived in college accommodation during term time and returned home during vacations. All but one had taken out student loans and received some family support; a few worked during holidays to supplement their income. One participant was a mother during her undergraduate studies.

3.2.4 Mothers – Cambridge

All Cambridge mothers completed secondary education, either in the UK, Ireland, or India. None had attended university. Their professional backgrounds varied widely, with fewer concentrated in care-related roles. However, all had taken on full-time caregiving responsibilities when their children

were born. At the time of our interviews, one mother worked as a bookkeeper and shop manager in the family's business, one in administrative work at a car garage, one in market research testing retail products, one as a local council administrator, and one as a teaching assistant for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

4. RESULTS

This section explores how first-generation women navigate the contradictions of (un)belonging in elite academic spaces, shaped by classed, racialised, and gendered structures. It centres three life narratives—one from Unicamp and two from Cambridge—to show how metaphorical diasporic spaces emerge through lived experiences of under-representation and relational dislocation. These narratives were selected for their thematic depth and contrast, rather than statistical representation. While all three women accessed university through public or state education, their trajectories illuminate how longing, exclusion, and inherited aspirations manifest differently across contexts.

4.1. Alma Mater: Nourishing Mother?

Maria, a Black Computer Science graduate from Unicamp, experienced acute challenges that reveal the intersection of material, epistemic, and emotional dimensions of unbelonging. She initially lacked a laptop and could not test her programming work, while her peers with their computers could.

> **I used my scholarship money to buy a laptop—wow, it was practically my entire scholarship just to pay for this laptop because I was in a class that wasn't held in the lab, so there weren't any computers to use... Actually, everyone had to write the code on paper and submit it, but if you had a computer, you could test it and see if your solution worked. And I didn't have a computer, you know?'**

Alongside this, the classroom language intensified her sense of being out of place:

> **Another thing that made me feel like I didn't belong was the English. Because I didn't know English, and the slides were all in English... I still remember that I didn't get the joke [in a video]. The whole class laughed because it was in English, and there weren't any subtitles.**

This moment illustrates how institutional norms around academic pace and communication create epistemic exclusion, where comprehension becomes a struggle not due to lack of ability but due to a lack of accommodation:

> **So, I felt really incapable, you know?... the professor would explain something, but there wouldn't be time to follow along or ask questions... I couldn't keep up with the pace... I'd leave the classroom crying because I just couldn't understand... There was the textbook, but that's all in super difficult language.**

Her mother described how these pressures materialised physically:

> **Psoriasis comes from anxiety, you know? It causes a lot of dandruff—some people get it on their hands, their scalp. But Maria had it really badly. I'd clear it in the morning, and by 10 a.m., it was all back again. Her small bedroom would get covered, covered. It was dreadful. And then there was that thing where you pull your own hair out... What's it called? Trichotillomania.**

While the psoriasis eventually went away, the mother noted that the hair-pulling behaviour—associated with anxiety—persisted even after Maria completed her degree. Rather than framing this as individual pathology, it points to the lingering emotional toll of navigating epistemic and social exclusion over time, in the absence of adequate institutional support. The mother adds:

> **Since we didn't go through that ourselves [university], we didn't really have much of a vision about it either. I even told her once, "Daughter, it's better if you go work at a supermarket till." I really said it because I couldn't stand seeing it anymore. You see, I do cleaning work, I go on foot, I lose weight—but I don't have any of those things. I told her, "What's the point? You're killing yourself, look at you!" But she pushed through and didn't give up.**

In a separate conversation, Maria confirms the encouragement she received from her mother:

> **I'd open up to her, and she'd encourage me: "You don't have to kill yourself for a degree. You can go back and work at a supermarket checkout and earn money and be fine, mentally." So even though my parents wanted me to graduate… they were clear: "don't sacrifice your health.**

This intergenerational emotional support offered by her mother contrasts sharply with the lack of structured mental health or academic scaffolding

within the institution. Despite being among Brazil's most prestigious public universities, Unicamp, in Maria's account, failed to provide mechanisms to mitigate her epistemic and emotional displacement in STEM[6], a field already shaped by racialised and gendered exclusion. Her experience evidenced how racial and class disparities persist even within spaces imagined as meritocratic or democratic.

Sofia, a white Cambridge student of mixed heritage, echoed this sense of institutional strain, particularly around mental health. She too suffered from psoriasis during her first year:

> **I had a lot of physical symptoms from the anxiety and stress... I'd have these massive flare-ups... My hair started to fall out. Luckily, all of that sort of went away after my first year.**

While Sofia's symptoms echoed some of Maria's physical responses to academic stress, their underlying conditions were shaped by different intersections of race, class, and institutional culture. The similarities in experience do not suggest equivalence but rather underscore how elite academic environments, despite distinct contexts, can produce emotional distress in structurally different ways.

She described the intense emotional environment in her women's college accommodation during exam season:

> **I keep hearing people crying in the accommodation blocks... It's just this sort of collective... You can hear people are struggling, and it's very inescapable... I feel it might feel similar to when you're in hospital... You see people... suffering... It's just overwhelming sometimes.**

Sofia linked these emotional responses to the competitive nature of elite universities, where the pressure to excel can be relentless. Her close friend, one of only two students from her school to go to university, died by suicide shortly after starting at Oxford:

> **That was a wake-up call for me... from that point on, my mum started saying, "I would rather you come home than do anything like that".**

This loss brings into sharp relief the existential weight of Hamlet's dilemma — 'to be or not to be'— where the pressure of not belonging can shift from a metaphysical belonging to a life-threatening question of ceasing to exist.

Aoife, another white Cambridge student from Ireland, offered a perspective shaped by both national pride and cultural dissonance. She was the first from

her community to be accepted to Oxbridge and described how the experience came with the burden of constant self-proof:

> **I feel like I'm always working a little bit harder to try and prove I should be here... It's always like I was trying to prove that I should be here.**

Her account offers a poignant illustration of the symbolic dimension of unbelonging: a constant sense of need to justify one's presence. For Aoife, epistemic exclusion included linguistic dimensions—not due to a lack of fluency, but because of how her Irish accent and ways of speaking were received—as well as forms of cultural capital: how knowledge is expressed and assumed.

> **Sometimes I say things, and I know for a fact my [Irish] accent is not thick. And I know it's not difficult to understand, and they somehow still don't understand... I've noticed with friends who have grown up with professors as parents, even their language... is at a higher level... When lectures use the same language, it's another distance between you and the content... It's a constant reminder this is their normal, but it's not my normal… a reminder that you're not the typical audience who's expected to be here.**

She described herself as always just outside the full experience of belonging:

> **Sometimes it feels kind of on the outside, like an outsider. You're kind of just on the outside sort of thing. [An] Onlooker: You can see it happen; you just can't partake in it.**

This sense of exclusion is both cultural and structural. As a first-generation student, Aoife had to navigate institutional traditions and social codes not designed with her in mind. She repeatedly referred to guilt—carrying her mother's unrealised dream of education, and the pressure to make the most of the opportunity:

> **I don't want to waste any of it. My mum would have absolutely loved to have had this opportunity. So, I feel like I need to use as much of it as I can... there's lots of guilt involved.**

Her mother expanded on this, emphasizing the dream deferred and the impossibility of realizing it now:

> **It's not ideal work [what I do]. It's not my ideal. It's not my dream... If I had the opportunity, I'd probably go back to university. But [now] I have to pay for all [my children] going to university. It's never going to happen for me.**

These intertwined memories—where a mother's longing is inherited by the daughter—shed light on the generational burden many first-generation students carry. Aoife was not just fulfilling her dream but also living the one her mother could not. This relational dynamic deepened her commitment but also her guilt, turning what might be a liberating educational experience into an emotionally fraught journey.

Maria, Sofia, and Aoife's stories converge in demonstrating that access alone does not equate to belonging. Their accounts illustrate how emotional, epistemic, and symbolic dimensions of exclusion persist long after formal barriers to entry have been crossed. These experiences reveal how institutions meant to nourish can also become sites of psychological and structural strain—spaces where longing for education is met not with care, but with codes, languages, and practices that reproduce inequality.

4.2. Best Practices: Possibilities within Limits

This section highlights institutional practices that enhanced students' sense of belonging—drawing from Maria and Aoife's stories. While these moments were less frequent and often could not offset larger patterns of exclusion, they offer insight into what can be done within the limits of current structures.

Maria recalled how Unicamp's bursary system, though bureaucratic, offered a form of material care:

> **Unicamp is really like a mum... they run a selection process that considers how urgently someone needs it and their income... We have to go through a process with a social worker to get the bursaries.**

For her, receiving university accommodation was transformative:

> **Afterwards, I managed to get a scholarship to live in Unicamp's student housing... That was the best time in terms of cost-benefit... I could really study and feel at ease.**

Crucially, accommodation also facilitated effective and epistemic belonging:

> **Unicamp's student accommodation was a very welcoming space. I found people who had similar backgrounds and were going through the same difficulties—so we could talk, understand each other, and help each other.'**

During the pandemic, the shift to recorded lectures dramatically improved her academic performance, self-esteem, and mental health:

> **During the pandemic... I could rewatch the lesson as many times as I needed... That was essential in helping me regain my confidence... I was getting 9s and 10s... [I realised] It wasn't just that the subject was difficult, I also had less anxiety.**

These examples show how some changes—such as recorded lectures—require modest shifts in academic culture and minimal financial investment, while others—like offering free student accommodation more widely—represent substantial commitments. Yet both types of interventions can make an immense difference in retaining and supporting students from structurally disadvantaged backgrounds. Material support translated into reduced anxiety, improved academic performance, and an emergent sense of belonging.

Aoife, in turn, recalled the power of symbolic and ritual inclusion. She described a 'surreal' moment that made her feel she had arrived:

> **I'd been to a Christmas orchestra... there was a ball... they taught us the ballroom dance afterwards, and then the next morning I was rowing on the river... it was everything I'd wanted... it was like just coming true and that was a really surreal moment I won't forget.**

She also recalled the welcome she received as an international fresher:

> **They brought me to my room... did talks about welcome to the UK... showed us what shops to go to... It felt like you were meant to be there... it wasn't like an inconvenience to them... When it came time to integrate into the full Freshers Week, it just felt like you were supposed to be there.**

Aoife's story captures vital dimensions of belonging: the pre-arrival longing shaped by her imagined idea of Cambridge, and the sense of being wanted that materialised through moments of institutional care. These feelings stood in sharp contrast to earlier moments. Together, they reveal how belonging is shaped both by longing and by how institutions receive you—whether you feel merely permitted, or genuinely welcomed and nourished. These practices are not structural solutions to entrenched inequality—and risk being framed as such by institutions seeking low-cost responses to complex problems—still, they point to intentional cultures of care that, when embedded in wider structural reform, can ease transitions and affirm a student's place.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper set out to examine whether the *alma mater*—a term that evokes nourishment, care, and academic inheritance—can truly act as a nourishing mother for under-represented women in elite public universities in Brazil and England. The findings show that diversity alone does not translate into inclusion or belonging.

Belonging, as experienced by first-generation women, is shaped by a constellation of dimensions: from public policy and institutional legacies to university culture, family history, and personal struggle. These findings call for a broader reflection on the role of the public university as a space for the common good, framed through a comparative lens that is transnational, intra-, and intergenerational.

Across the lived experiences of mothers and daughters, longing emerges as a generational wait for access to formal educational opportunities that exceeds the boundaries of university campuses and carries the weight of imagined futures. Belonging, in this sense, is not about fitting into pre-existing norms; it is about claiming the right to be, to exist, and to flourish in spaces historically not made for them. The desire for higher education is not merely aspirational; it is intergenerational, grounded in memory, sacrifice, and hope.

By adopting an intergenerational lens, this study challenges the search for quick fixes to entrenched inequalities. It suggests that lasting transformation in elite public universities depends not only on increasing representation but on changing cultures, structures, and expectations, changes that, over time, can benefit future generations of students and educators alike. Without such change, efforts to belong may come to rely on forms of fitting in that, while necessary for survival, risk reproducing the very norms and exclusions that made these spaces inaccessible in the first place.

The decision to compare Brazil and England was not only contextual but political. Brazil offers important lessons to the Global North—through its provision of tuition-free public universities and its use of affirmative action to address historical educational debts. These policies, though contested, represent real commitments to equity and serve as potential benchmarks for public higher education systems globally.

At the same time, the study underscores the ongoing urgency of belonging in public higher education. Representation in numbers—long fought

for—should not be taken for granted. The current backlash against policies of access and equity—in both Brazil and England, and elsewhere—makes clear that for some, diversity itself awakens feelings of resentment and is experienced as a threat. In this context, the quest for a more inclusive university is far from over. It must continue—not only through metrics and policies, but through transformed relationships, cultures of care, and a reimagined understanding of what the public university can and should be.

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NOTES

NOTES

1 The *Programa de Ação Afirmativa e Inclusão Social* (PAAIS), or Affirmative Action and Social Inclusion Programme, was introduced by Unicamp in 2004. It awards bonus points in the university entrance exam to students from state schools and, later, to Black and Brown candidates. See: https://www.comvest.unicamp.br/inclusao-social/inclusao-paais/

2 https://www.comvest.unicamp.br/inclusao-social/cotas/

3 https://www.comvest.unicamp.br/ingresso-2025/vestibular-indigena-2025/

4 https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/news/women-cambridge-womens-struggle-education#:~:-text=The%20impact%20of%20women%20at,British%20University%20to%20do%20so

5 BAME stands for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic—a term commonly used in the UK to refer to racially minoritised groups. This classification contrasts with Brazil's official categories: Black, Brown, White, and Indigenous.

6 STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.